

Dialogue

Perspectives on the Crisis

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Shortlands Worry

Martina Ului with Nicola Baird

My village is Maleai, in the Shortland Islands. We have plenty of wantoks and relatives in Bougainville. In fact, when the two countries were split we thought it was strange. That's not our way; that is the government's way. I've never been to Bougainville, but my relatives used to go there regularly. Our Shortlands men used to smoke fish and gather clam shell to go and sell in Buin, south Bougainville. There used to be a big market there—just 40 minutes away by canoe. Lots of Shortland villagers used to go across to market so they could bring back store food and cargo, which were cheaper there than in the Solomons.

The Shortlands is part of Western Province and our main center, and nearest hospital, is Gizo. It takes eight hours to get to Gizo by boat. Honiara, the country's capital, is three days away. During the time the copper mine was working, many of our Shortlands people went across and up to Kieta. They would go to Arawa, Bougainville's biggest town. People brought back cooking pots, clothes, tinned food, and rice. They used kina in Bougainville but that was no problem. Business people took over the Solomon Islands dollar and exchanged it at Buin or Kieta.

When the crisis started, Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) had an arrangement to give the Bougainville people humanitarian aid. Their medicines go straight to Bougainville, but nothing has ever been sent to the Shortlands clinic at Nila, although Bougainville people come all the time to our clinic. It's already serving all our villages and with the extra Bougainville patients, the villagers in the Shortlands are short of medicine now. I suppose if SICA did leave medicine at Nila it would just encourage more Bougainvilleans to come across.

There are just two nurses running the clinic, so they work very hard and then run out of medicines. For a problem case, the only transport to the hospital is by chartered plane to Gizo or Honiara. Who pays for that?

Well until recently it has been the Solomon Islands government, but now, with our country's economic crisis, the nurses have been told by the medical people in Gizo, to say to sick Bougainvilleans: "You must meet your own expenses, fare, food, hospital fee—everything." This is hard on the people of Bougainville and terrible for the nurses.

The nurses are always tired as there are serious cases all the time. When people come across from Bougainville they have to dodge the patrol boats. If they were caught they might be killed—so it is not surprising the patients find it hard to bring food across with them. There are quarantine restrictions too. In Papua New Guinea there is a giant snail, so you cannot take fruit or vegetables across from Bougainville to the Shortlands. So who ends up feeding the people who come across? In the end it's villagers, or the nurses, who have to find rice and a pot.

When I was home recently very sick patients were coming over. One woman was having problems with a breech birth and needed to have a plane chartered for her to go to Honiara's Number 9 hospital. She'd been taken across in a canoe from Bougainville. In the end her baby died. Malaria is bad in Bougainville. This malaria is the worst type and it is making people in the Shortlands worry as we are starting to get it now. Even if it does not kill you, it can knock you out for five or six days. We need some help to try and fight it.

The Bougainville people are really suffering. There are no services, no petrol, no hospitals, no schools. But it must be the women who suffer most: they have no clinics, no immunization for babies, no prenatal checkups, nothing. Of course, the people I know about are from the coastal villages; it must be far worse in the middle of the bush there.

Our local churches do not send direct help to Bougainville either; that's all centrally organized from Honiara. But individuals do help by giving food to the Bougainville people. This crisis is making the Shortlands villagers suffer. Since the crisis began, Bougainvilleans have come over to the Shortlands to buy store food. Those business people with shops are really doing well now. The problem now is that business people can only see one side—profit. The price of store goods has gone up so much that local people find it hard to pay. Our villagers cannot go to market either because of the crisis. Rice is being sold for about S1\$50 or K20 a sack. K20 is about S1\$60, but for the Bougainville people there is no alternative. One problem for them is they do not know how to convert the exchange rate from kina

to dollar. The business men do though. Washing soap, which everyone needs, is \$1.50 in Honiara but is sold for \$2.50 in the Shortlands, or K3 = S1\$9. That gives the businessman \$7.50 profit.

It's a mystery to us where the Bougainville people get their money from, but every day canoes come across and people pay for all our food and petrol. They can afford it, we can't. They bring over all kinds of things to sell—fridges or iceboxes for \$800; washing machines for \$150; generators; deep freezes; cushion chairs or sofas for \$200. These goods are very cheap, and people do buy them. Most Shortlands villagers have got iceboxes and generators now! But if people bring in things like that and they are not sprayed against this giant snail it is going to be a problem. If the snail goes near a garden or fruit trees, your food will be spoilt. Any overseas ships that come to Honiara's Point Cruz wharf, or planes landing at Henderson airport, are sprayed. I know that since May there have been no proper immigration regulations followed, including spraying the canoes landing near my village. What is the difference between the Shortlands and Honiara?

One good thing is that this time the Shortlands men do not drink as much beer because the price has gone up so much. That is because the Bougainville dealers are willing to pay for cartons and cartons of beer to go and sell. (A carton sells for about \$72 but just \$60 in town—two cartons nearly pays for a washing machine).

The coconut wireless is working overtime. We heard that only old men and young boys were left in Bougainville because all the strong men had been killed by the defense forces. That is not true, but it makes everyone afraid. To me it looks like the saltwater people from the south and the people from the Kieta side are going against each other. The people in south Bougainville now seem to think of themselves as part of Solomon Islands because the Shortlands people are helping them in so many ways. They just want to get back to living happily and not struggling. The feeling in the Shortlands is that it's just too much for us to cope with now that the Bougainville people come across all the time needing us. I think these same problems must be happening in Choiseul too. The Bougainville people's problems are spilling over into the Shortlands and are starting to affect us too. When it comes down to it, no one is winning this crisis, but people in both Bougainville and Shortlands are really learning what suffering means now.